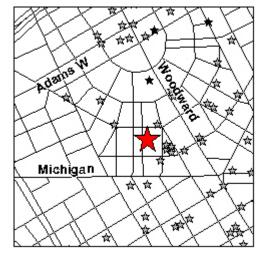# Washington Boulevard Historic District

General boundaries: Washington Boulevard between State and Clifford.

Local
State
State Marker
National   √   7/15/82

The Book Tower
Courtesy of DetroitPix

Historic overview:

The Washington Boulevard District is an intact streetscape of architecturally distinguished commercial buildings dating from 1901-1930, with the majority built in the 1920s. The district is a product of a planned real estate development inspired by the City Beautiful movement, and was carried out as the private artistic endeavor of one family and their architect, Louis Kemper. These buildings illustrate the evolution of the commercial style in Detroit as it was practiced by some of Michigan's master architects.

Washington Boulevard was one of the grand boulevards laid out in the Woodward Street plan of 1807, and was developed as an upper class residential area. One of the residents was J. Burgess Book, Jr., son of one of Detroit's wealthiest families. Book dreamed of transforming Washington Boulevard into Detroit's most exclusive shopping district. He was influenced by the City Beautiful movement, and encouraged by Edward Bennett, a famous master planner in that style, to develop Washington into a Beaux Arts streetscape. The street was broadened and ornamented in the early part of the twentieth century due to Book's efforts, and eventually his family owned 60% of street frontage to further foster his projects.

Louis Kemper, one of Detroit's best known architects, built five buildings for the Books, including the monumental Book Cadillac Hotel in 1924. However, plans were cut short with the Depression, and today two story buildings remain where a 70-story tower was planned. The contrast of buildings serves as a reminder that there was a fashionable retail area as well as an office district. In the late 1970s, Washington Boulevard was redesigned with an urban pedestrian mall motif that included new plantings, paving, sculptures and an amphitheater.

City of Detroit Planning and Development Department